

STATEMENT OF WALLACE MATTHEWS

Thank you, Senator McCain and ladies and gentlemen of the committee. My name is Wallace Matthews and I have covered professional and amateur boxing for more than 5 years, first as a boxing writer and later, a general columnist for New York Newsday and currently, as a general sports columnist for the New York Post.

I have also covered professional boxing for ESPN, Showtime, SportsChannel and NBC, where I covered perhaps the most corrupt Olympic boxing tournament in history at the Seoul Games of 1988.

Previously, I had competed as an amateur boxer in New York City, including the 1977 Golden Gloves Tournament.

Through the years I have covered hundreds of title bouts and gotten to know many boxers, trainer, managers and promoters.

I have seen the best of the sport and I have seen the worst, and in my opinion, what took place in Madison Square Garden on March 13, 1999 was among the worst.

There is no simple answer to the question, "What's wrong with boxing," nor is there any one person who can provide all the answers.

And there is a deeper problem, in that the people who can provide the answers are the least likely to want to see boxing cleaned up.

The promoters and the heads of the sanctioning know where all the bodies are buried, where all the loopholes are hidden and where all the trapdoors are sprung.

They know boxing is largely a lawless society, and it is a society they have mastered and profited by. They have no desire to see order brought into a system that thrives on chaos.

And of course, you do not go to the criminals and ask how to stop crime.

Instead, you must beef up your police force, and in the case of boxing, that police force is the state commission.

To my mind, a state athletic commission has only two functions: To protect the rights and safety of the boxers, and to protect the rights of the public.

In too many cases, state commissions fail dismally on both counts.

Unfortunately, the biggest obstacle to improving the state commissions is the people who appoint them.

Historically, governors have used state athletic commissions as their own personal garbage cans to dump off people to whom they owe favors.

Rarely do the people regulating the fights know much about boxing, and often when someone with a boxing background is appointed, it is often a ceremonial appointee, such as when Gov. George Pataki named former heavyweight champion Floyd Patterson to head the NYSAC.

This turned out to be as bad a case of exploitation of a fighter as I have ever seen by any promoter, since it soon became apparent that Mr. Patterson was not mentally capable of handling the job. It was merely Gov. Pataki's way of throwing an acceptable and popular name to the media while sneaking his cronies in through the back door to conduct the day-to-day business of the commission.

It may not seem like much but these are the people who license the judges, who decide whether fighters are fit to step into the ring and whether matches will be competitive. They are the ones who are supposed to keep the promoters and sanctioning bodies in check, a task they are ill-equipped to handle. Instead, the commission often winds up acting not as their watchdogs but as their accomplices, either willingly or unwillingly.

In the case of the Holyfield-Lewis bout, the New York State Athletic Commission failed both the fighters and the public.

It failed the fighters by not insuring that the most anticipated heavyweight fight of the decade would also have the very best judges.

Stanley Christodoulou of South Africa and Larry O'Connell of England were respected judges, but assigning Eugenia Williams of Atlantic City, a veritable novice of questionable ethics, to judge Holyfield Lewis was like bringing in a Little League umpire to work the World Series.

New York could have insisted on at least two of their own judges to work the bout, as Nevada always does. More importantly, it should have taken the most basic step of requiring the judges to take out New York State licenses. It did neither.

As a result, not only did New York end up being embarrassed by the judging of the bout, but it had no power to suspend the licenses of any of the judges pending the outcome of any investigation into their conduct.

Such a suspension is a very powerful hammer since it would effectively prevent a judge from working anywhere in the United States under the reciprocal agreement recognized by the American Association of Boxing Commissioners.

But New York surrendered that hammer and wound up with no power over the officials in a bout fought under its jurisdiction.

The commission also failed the fans that night.

Boxing is a sport in which unforeseen events, be they injuries, cuts or the biting off of one fighter's ear by another, may result in a premature and unsatisfying end to a bout.

But for the price of a ticket-and Holyfield-Lewis tickets went for as much as \$1,500-a fan should have the not to ~ that its' the bout goes to a natural conclusion, he or she will be rewarded with a fair decision.

On March 13, 22,000 people came to the Garden under the promise that they would see the crowning of an undisputed heavyweight champion. And for 12 rounds, they did, or so they thought. Then the scorecards were read and they were told that what their eyes had seen really had not happened. Worst of all if they wanted to see an undisputed heavyweight champion, they would have to come back and pay for it again.

That, too, was the direct result of the poor choice of officials for a very important bout.

How to rectify the problem? The simple answer is to clean out the athletic commissions and bring in people who are both qualified and honest enough to insure that the promoters and sanctioning bodies are held to a higher standard of behavior.

But I no longer trust the governors to do the right thing, which is to appoint the right people, on merit rather than on how much they have contributed to an election campaign.

That is why I believe a federal overseer, a policeman over the policemen, is needed to make sure that governors appoint qualified people and that those people strictly enforce the rules of their state commission.

Also, the practice of promoters paying judges' expenses must be stopped.

As it stands now, while the commissions oversee the payment of a judges' fee, nobody other than the promoter and the judges see the reimbursement of travel and lodging expenses.

As a result, a judge could quite conceivably submit an expense voucher for \$100 to a promoter--and receive a check for \$10,000 in return. Under ordinary circumstances, no one outside of those two would know.

Let's face it, the people who profit off boxing have had many years of practice maneuvering through a system in which rules are not only made to be broken, but are often rewritten or ignored.

Just like the underworld, you are not going to change the way they do business overnight, but you can make it more difficult for them to do it, at least as openly and brazenly as they did it that night at Madison Square Garden.

And the only ones who can do it are the state commissions. But competent, powerful, honest state commissions, not the sham agencies filled with patronage appointees that exist in too many states today.

My thanks to Senator McCain and the committee for allowing me to speak, and I will try to answer any and all questions you may have for me. Thank you.